

General Recall Feb 1978

Bob West

Interview of ROBERT D. WEST, Music USN by Gerald E. Foreman, Historian of the Association. Mr. West was liberated from D-25-M, the 5th 25 Club magazine, at 1400 O'clock on December 8th.

ORDEAL IN OKLAHOMA'S AA MAGAZINE

FOREMAN: West, I wonder if you'd like to tell me about your ordeal in the OKLAHOMA. I have read your article in LIFE and it interested me greatly.

WEST: Well, if you read it - that was the whole thing.

Q: Did you talk over everything; Were there any decisions which required any discussion?

A: There were several decisions - one was to stay where we were after we discussed whether we should move out and try to find a better place.

Q: Did you have any light down there?

A: No, Absolutely none. One thing I will never forget - do you remember how they used to advertise those flashlights - I think it was Everready - I thought how valuable a flashlight would be at this time - it was so dark down there, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

Q: The reason I asked that question pointedly - it sounds like a dumb question on the face of it - was that in one of the accounts, the men said there was an eerie light in the compartment, and they could not understand where the light came from Then DeLong states that they had some service from a damaged flashlight.

A: We couldn't see anything at all, and the only thing we did was to sit right where we were. You spoke of Crenshaw. He and I talked over a few things - like what we would do if and when we got out.

Q: Was there any panic?

A: Not. You know, once in a while we would all fall asleep and then somebody would wake up and count Off; one, two, three, four, five - you see there were five of us - so when we heard them answer one thru five, we knew we were all still OK.

Q: Did you have any concept of time down there?

A: I didn't know whether it was four hours or four days or

Q: That backs up what I've always believed. There were stories about when they broke open a compartment on the CALIFORNIA, I believe, they found a calendar checked off for two weeks - well, I personally do not believe it; they may have been just guessing - or perhaps every time they awoke after dozing, they thought it was another day -

A: I'm sure I dozed off maybe seven or eight times in the course of our confinement. I was tired from the night before; we had been up most of the night and I don't think there was any way in the world we could have kept track of time.

Q: DeLong spoke of noises from without that were heard inside the Steering Room

A: Within there was no sound - no sound at all; but we had a dog-wrench, and I know WE made plenty of sound! Whenever anybody woke up he would pound on the bulk-head with the dog-wrench. I think one of the rescuers said they had heard tapping - it might have been US.

Q: As a matter of fact, Beal and De-Long who both knew the Morse Code quite well, said that they were signalled to keep quiet - with too much signaling going on, the rescuers could get confused.

A: Sounds were reverberating thru-out the ship and it was difficult to determine where the sounds were coming from.

Q: Steering Room Aft communicated with Radio IV; you were in D-25-M the Anti-Aircraft Magazine.

A: That was D-25 M the "m" stands for magazine

A: Ya, that's where it was - in, the magazine. It makes you think how fortunate it was that there was no fire around the ship - that was the only thing that saved us - no fire. All the rest of the damaged ships burned - it is just amazing to me. Almost any explosion in that gas and oil should have caused some kind of fire; and it didn't.

Q: What was the first word you heard after you were rescued?

A: Well, we heard them drilling, and the tapping in answer to our tapping, but the one thing that scared the life out of me was when the water came up. I guess the pressure of the air was holding it back before; but when the pressure was released, we felt the water coming up around our feet - and we wondered, "Doggone! She is going down further, and they are probably too late! The ship is going to settle before we get out!" Then - when it reached my ankles, it began to recede

January 18, 2002

Q: They had built up air pressure in other compartments as the water was being pumped out in order to keep the water from re-entering before they completed the rescue, as I understand it.

A: I never did know the technicalities of the operation.

Q: Well, *THEY* did alright; they did everything right that day!

A: The rescue party - they were the people who really counted that day. Without them we would never have got out - it was really amazing.

Q: It has done ME a world of good, having decided on and implemented this theme of "32 Came Back" - and this West Coast Meeting! I was January 18, 2002 so really fortunate to get these fellows 2000 miles away, to grab my pass and run for a touchdown.. Now if we can get officers chosen at this convention to carry on next year

A: I'm sure they will - but where you get your energy from, I don't know. You are sure the best man for this job! But now I want to tell you about Pritchard... (*Ed. note. The name is probably Charles F. Pritchard SFIC*). We had gone into a huddle on a ladder, and this guy P- came out of nowhere with a flashlight. He said, "I think I know of a way out!" and he wanted to lead us. In a way, I was tempted to go; but we were so beat! Tired and disgusted; soaked in water and oil - we just decided to wait it out for a while. He was one of the casualties, and it was a shame, because he had known such a tremendous amount about the ship - he'd been on her about 13 years, and he knew it, as they say, upside down and backwards - which was a good way to know this one, but he didn't make it out - of all people!

Q: And I am amazed that others didn't follow him; knowing that here was something positive and with knowledgeable leadership. I would probably have gone with him....

A: But as I said before we were just too beat!

Q: The Lord works in wondrous ways

A: You see, we'd been swimming around in that water and no liking to get back into it. Then after we'd waited, and he didn't return; there was no point in going in that direction - might as well wait where we were.....

1/19/94

DEAR PAUL

JUST A NOTE TO TELL YOU I HAD A STROKE
IN JULY 18, 1993. GETTING ALONG FINE NOW.
WANTED TO TELL YOU I HAVE MOVED AND
I HAVE A NEW ADDRESS NOW. IT IS:

4525 MANZANITA AVE APT 234
CARMICHAEL CA 95608-1469

TELE: 916-486-8672

I REMEMBER CHIEF HARVEY BUT I THINK
JOHN BOUNDS MADE CHIEF BEFORE PETE HARVEY
BUT WAS TRANSFERRED WITH J.J. McCOLGAN SOMETIME
IN NOVEMBER 1941. THE OTHERS I DON'T RECALL. GET IN
TOUCH. IN MEANTIME THE BEST TO YOU YOUR FRIEND BOB
McCOLGAN

For most Americans then at an age of understanding, Dec. 7, 1941 was a calamity too enormous to comprehend: on a Sunday morning, five battlewagons of the line on the bottom, along with lesser craft; 2,403 men dead or dying between breakfast and the chaplain's call to prayer; a nation's pride in the mud.

A quarter century later more than 1,000 men are still down there, entombed or enshrined in the crunched hull of the *Arizona*. Others lie up on Red Hill, in the canvas bags or pine-board coffins to which they were consigned after retrieval from the sunken ships. Some died too quickly and in too much confusion to understand—any more than the rest of America—precisely what had come upon them. Others were dead but not yet dead.

When the *West Virginia* sank straight down that morning, three sailors were trapped in a ship's storeroom. The compartment's watertight hatches were dogged down and the compartment remained dry though deep beneath the surface. But nobody knew the three sailors were there. The three kept track of time and every 24 hours cross-checked a calendar. Months later when salvagers reached the compartment, they found the calendar, checked off through Dec. 23, 1941. That was the day, evidently, when their air finally was used up.

A few others lived who had no more reason than the *West Virginia*'s three to expect it. When the battleship *Oklahoma* capsized within the first 20 minutes of the Japanese attack, she became, for some 450 enlisted men and officers, a lightless, inverted, escape-proof death house. Most of them did die, but in the next 36 hours, by a handful of random chances, 32

men were cut out alive from the ship's upended bottom.

By any honest measure, when these men came back up into the light, they were reborn. What may a man bring up from death? What may he bring from a brand-new life? Wealth? Honors? Power? Dignity? Failure? Disgrace? Little or nothing?

One who got that unparalleled chance to reinvest his life was Robert D. West. Until then Robert West's 21 years hadn't promised much, either for good or ill. He was born in Chicago in 1920, and two years later his father died. "From then on we were strictly on relief."

The boy and his widowed mother moved in with his grandmother, who was a piano teacher. But the deep West Side of Chicago, around California St. and Jackson Blvd., was no place to get rich, or even to eat tolerably well,

on the proceeds of music lessons. So Robert, an only child, began selling newspapers when he was seven. He worked three hours a day at 15¢ an hour after school—"45¢ a day was pretty good."

When the Depression settled in, life grew even bleaker. A relief case worker found a rent-free apartment for them in housing which had been condemned as unfit for habitation. Robert's mother eventually remarried—a sign painter and sometime saxophonist. But by then the Depression was deep and bitter, and there was even less subsistence in the flat than there had been before.

Robert was about 15 then and in high school. He belonged to a gang and although you could not rightfully say that the seven members were delinquents, they were poor and adventurous, and they needed and wanted a lot of things. The closest they got to real trouble, however, was when an older brother of one member got involved in a robbery in which the im was killed. That older

brother touched them all with the shadow of the gallows—and the cold awe that went with it.

Robert's grandmother had taught him the rudiments of the piano, and now he became fascinated by his stepfather's sax. By painful effort he scraped together \$13 and bought a saxophone in a pawnshop. His stepfather taught him to play it—more or less.

Meanwhile, although most of the gang had left high school as freshmen (neither education nor anything else seemed to promise a hell of a lot to a poor kid on the West Side), Robert stuck it out in Marshall High until he was a junior, 17, a skinny, red-haired, sharp-nosed 117 pounds, flunking math and "floundering around" generally in school. Finally, one day in 1937, Robert made a proposal while the gang was hanging around with nothing to do.

"How about let's enlist in the Navy?" he asked. The idea tasted of merit and they went in a body to the recruiting office. Robert, the scrawniest kid among them, was the only one to get past the physical. The Navy recruiter had to make three trips to the apartment before Robert's mother gave her approval.

Two years later, in 1939, Mus 2/C (Musician Second Class) Robert West was aboard the cruiser *Raleigh* when it was dispatched to Hawaiian waters. If he ever hated anything it was that duty, in and out of Pearl Harbor and Honolulu. War was looming, but sailors were not yet heroes. Honolulu, which for a long time had been forced to co-exist with the Navy, could not be forced to love it. The lack of affection was made particularly clear to enlisted men.

by KEITH WHEELER

'These maneuvers are beginning to look like the real McCoy'

REBORN CONTINUED

"We could go to the Y.M.C.A. or feed nickels to the jukeboxes at the Black Cat cafe on King Street. That was about it. For some reason the fanciest hotel in Waikiki—the Royal Hawaiian—was the only place that treated sailors anywhere near decently. But out there a beer cost an arm and a leg—which meant you had to nurse it. On \$54 a month, it made sense to ration your beers." So when the battleship *Oklahoma* came in on maneuvers, West fell victim to a misguided impulse. In those days, under special circumstances, it was possible for men of equal rank to trade jobs if their superiors approved. West found a sailor on the battlewagon who would swap berths with him—for a price. Counting on his conviction that the big ships were rotated stateside every six months, West borrowed \$100 and bought off his intended pigeon.

West believes he has always been lucky; but it is also clear that, from time to time, he has fought his luck. He had no more

than completed his devious transaction when the *Oklahoma* was ordered to full-time service in Hawaiian waters.

On the *Oklahoma* as on the *Reeleigh*, West played clarinet in the ship's band. He had converted his old sketchy skill with the saxophone into an equally slight familiarity with the new instrument. This duty gave him little esthetic pleasure.

"In the first place, I was lousy. How do I know? I could hear myself. Second, I had had my own wooden clarinet, but a drunk ensign had busted it by falling into the band at an officers' dance. I took it to the ship's captain and he said he would have it fixed. But I guess he knew more about navigation than music. He sent it to the shipfitters and it came back an inch longer and a tone flat. After that they issued me a government clarinet which was made of metal and sounded like tin. Between us, that GI pipe and I were awful."

Saturday night, Dec. 6, 1941,

West went on liberty with two handbuddies, JeeP Larson of

Utah and Joe Hoffman of Ohio. Both would be dead by 9 a.m. the next day.

On the morning of the 7th, at 7:55, the band was mustered ashore ready to march astern to the fantail for the raising of the colors at 8. The colors were never raised that day. The bandmen heard planes coming, then saw them, then saw a bomb fall on Ford Island. Joe Hoffman, beside West, said, "These maneuvers are beginning to look just like the real McCoy."

Then it was the real McCoy. West watched a plane as it drew a bead on the minelayer *Ogala* across the channel. "The old tub folded in and out just like an accordion,"

Somebody yelled, "This is the real thing!" and the General Quarters alarm went off with its wild, blood-thumping, adrenalin-spouting urgency.

When there is trouble, a sailor's guidance system tells him just one thing: get to your battle station on the double. West bolted for

his. On the way, without breaking stride, he pitched the government's tin clarinet over the side, telling himself, "Well, I won't need that any more!"

West's battle station was with a damage control party in the carpenter shop on the third deck down, where one of his jobs was to be the last man in and then close and dog down the watertight hatch. He had recently been transferred to this station as punishment for being caught playing arcy-decney—the Navy's brand of racehorse backgammon—during a practice GQ. All those who were on duty at West's former station were among the first to die.

The first torpedo hit as West closed the hatch—no terrible noise, but a jar that sickened the heart. The ship listed immediately and everybody scrambled for the high—or starboard—side of the steel compartment. Somebody at the high side threw West a line and he pulled himself up the slanting deck and quickly grabbed hold.

The hits were coming in mul-

tips; with each one the ship shuddered, heaved and went over farther. She was dying, not in a smooth roll but in convulsive jerks. Somebody among the 15 men in the tilted compartment yelled that he could see light from an open door. Ten men rushed for it. Five got through, five were caught and drowned as the sea poured in. Now only West and four others, clinging to the high side, were left. "I had counted six hits and I said to the kid beside me, 'One more and she's going over.' We got the seventh hit and she went."

As the *Oklahoma* rolled over, it was a time of total disorientation. Everything which belonged under a man's feet was now above his head. Soon West and his four companions were floundering in water, with only about a foot of air between them and the deck overhead. Strangely, there was enough light to make out forms. "I don't know why or where it was coming from. All the lamps were out, even the battle lanterns. What light there was seemed to be coming up from the bottom.

That's impossible but, anyhow, we could still see a little."

Somebody remembered a door to an adjoining compartment and, fumbling, found it beneath the surface. One by one, they ducked under and swam through the hatch to the next compartment where the air pocket was bigger. West didn't realize it but he swam carrying a dog wrench that he had picked up in the first compartment. Thereafter he kept a convulsive grip on the wrench out of some half-formed idea that they'd have to do something and would need a tool to do it with.

From the beginning there had been a lot of yelling and praying, and West had made a discovery which astonished him. Any group of men contains its bullies, its loudmouths, its braggarts, and West now knew that big wheels can be the first to whimper, to get hysterical, to give up and die.

"The five of us who were left could still see a little in the second compartment. I watched this guy trying to drown himself. He'd shove his head under and hold it, but then he'd come up again. He

It was dry—but ROBERT WEST still a place to die

kept trying—and quitting. In the end, he lived."

In the second compartment, too, there was still that mysterious illumination. (Others who lived believed that the ghostly light was the glow of phosphorescence stirred up by the intruding water.) They could make out the bulk of a ladder, now upside down like everything else. They swam to it and clambered up.

"A guy I knew, a shipfitter named Pritchard, came out of nowhere with a flashlight, spotted us and swam over. He said he knew a way out and did we want to come. We didn't, for some reason, just then—maybe because our

feet were out of the water. He went on. I found out later he never made it."

The five men in the compartment moved higher up the ladder, step by step, as the water pursued them. Time had become timeless; there was no way of reckoning how long they had been down.

The sailor sitting beside West began to sob and West tried to think of a way to console him but couldn't because he didn't really believe they were going to get out. For lack of any other reason but instinct, he would now and then pound on the bulkhead with the dog wrench.

"We'd dose off, then wake up and count off by numbers to make sure we were still five. I would catch myself thinking of screwy things, like wondering how the Chicago Bears had made out with the Cardinals the day we went under. And with all the seawater and fuel oil I'd swallowed and heaved out, I was thirsty. I kept remembering the times, like a damn fool I'd pushed away a glass of water in a restaurant."

The water kept coming up and they kept retreating. At last it was too close. And then the sailor on the highest step found a door. It was dogged down and padlocked, but it was something to attack and they did so. It may have taken 10 minutes or an hour to smash the padlock with West's wrench. They went through into total darkness.

It was dry there—for the time being. But they knew the water was slowly chasing them up from below. This was still a place to die. You only needed to wait; death would get there. They dozed again, then counted off again out of each man's necessity to know he was not yet alone.

had then switched to safer air-driven tools.

West and his group, half stupefied by resignation and stale air, became aware of metallic sounds overhead. Automatically West pounded back with the dog wrench. Then a hole began to open above them and before long it was a two-foot square. Hands reached down and got them. They were still inside the ship, but the rescuers led them along a passage cut through the ship's double bottom and out into daylight.

"Not ordinary daylight—it was all mist and smoke. It made me sick to see it. I had thought it was only the *Oglala* and us, but here was everything down and afire."

The first thing he heard was noon chow call from the *Maryland* alongside; they had been buried for 28 hours.

Somebody gave West an apple and a slug of whisky. One of the five borrowed a piece of paper and wrote down five copies of all their names and addresses.

"What the hell. No clothes, no pockets, soaked in grease. I tossed it away. I still don't know who they were."

Two days later he was back aboard the *Oklahoma*, standing watch, midnight to 4 a.m., on the old battlewagon's indelately upended bottom. There no longer seemed any point in listening for signs of life inside the 29,000-ton sepulcher.

He was soon to discover the ultimate irony of coming up from a dead ship, just barely not dead himself and so oil-soaked that it would take a month to get clean. When the ship rolled over, it had taken his identity with it. The Navy had only recently begun issuing dog tags, and West had never received any. He couldn't remember his serial number, and

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Escape, when it came, was almost anticlimactic. Unknown to them, the *Oklahoma*'s bottom rolled over 150°, lay curving above the surface like a vast dead whale, and since the morning of the 7th, rescue parties had been hunting for life inside and trying to find ways to get at the live men without killing them. They had killed the first two they found when the acetylene cutting torches they used set off fires that suffocated the trapped men. They

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Perhaps the Lord never intended West for a life of high drama. Certainly there was no drama before the battleship rolled over on top of him, and the life he has led after that high peak could be called commonplace—except for one thing. Something quite remarkable has happened to Robert West during the 25 years since he was spared.

With no great fanfare West's borrowed quarter century began to pay off on March 14, 1943. Late in 1942, the Navy had ordered him to shore duty and sent him to help establish a training station at Bainbridge, Md., near Baltimore. The Navy had not yet got around to compensating him for possessions still upside down in the *Oklahoma*, and he was short of clothes, money and nearly everything else.

But when another sailor said he was making a liberty in Philadelphia and would try to get West a blind date if he wanted to come along, West went, threadbare as he was. His date turned out to be Betty Lawless. The two couples went to a rathskeller on Spruce Street for a few beers and a dance.

In some ways, Betty had come from a background not unlike his own. Her mother was widowed and the family didn't have much money. In other ways it was very different. While West claimed no discernible religion, Betty was a devout Catholic. While West was an only child, Betty was one of seven. Various considerations fetched Robert West, but important among them was that big family. West had not been conscious of being lonely, particular-